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A Roman Tavern on Monte Iato (PA)**

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Takeaway in Antiquity – A Roman Tavern on Monte Iato (PA)

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Abstract

Takeout meals and drinks are not only a modern phenomenon but were already popular in the Roman period. A lot of examples of taverns or bars were found in Pompeii, buried by the eruption of Vesuvius. In Roman Sicily only a few taverns are published so far, and not in great detail at that.

The Roman settlement Ietas, situated in the interior of western Sicily, has been excavated since 1971 by the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Zurich. In 1992, a building with an L-shaped masonry counter and an oven was discovered and subsequently interpreted as a tavern. The detailed analysis of this building will allow answering questions regarding the appearance of a Roman tavern in Sicily, the economy and trading network of Ietas and the everyday life of the city's inhabitants.

In this paper I will first of all focus on the furnishings and facilities of this building, which can be reconstructed by examining the finds from the destruction layer that filled both rooms. Secondly, I will discuss the significance of this tavern for the customers before finally addressing commercial questions regarding the city of Ietas.

Keywords: Archaeology, Roman Sicily, excavation, tavern, trade.

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Introduction

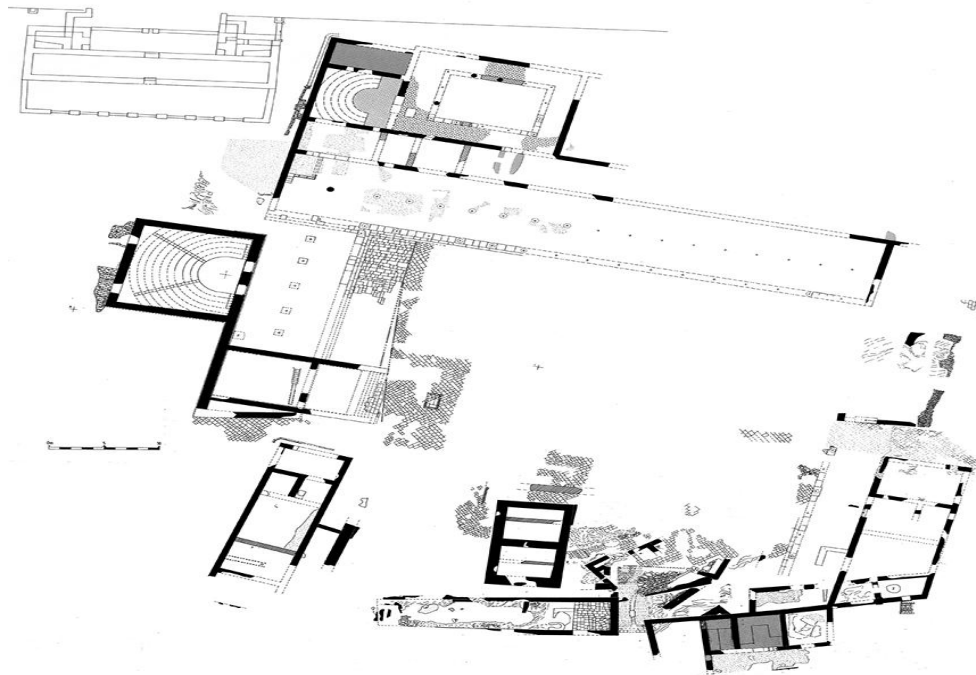
The Roman settlement Ietas is situated approximately 30 km to the southwest of Palermo in the interior of Sicily. The ancient city was built on the Monte Iato, at the foot of which the modern towns San Cipirello and San Giuseppe Iato are located.

The Monte Iato was already settled in the Archaic period. In the Early Hellenistic period the settlement was extended and the theatre, the *agora* (marketplace) and several luxuriant houses were built. By the time of the Early Imperial period the population had decreased and urban life in Ietas grew more modest.

According to Diodorus Siculus, the inhabitants of Ietas, formerly belonging to the Punic dominion, surrendered to Rome in the First Punic War (264-241 BC)¹. Pliny the Elder records that Ietas was a *civitas stipendiaria* (a tributary town)².

The building that will be discussed in this paper is situated to the south of the *forum* (Roman marketplace and civic centre) of the city (cf. Figure 1). It has been excavated between 1992 and 2007 by the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Zurich³.

Figure 1. Ietas, Map of the Forum



Source: Database of the Ietas excavation project, Zurich.

It is a long rectangular building which measures 4,10 by 21,00 metres and consists of two rooms (cf. Figure 2): To the east, room A with the customer

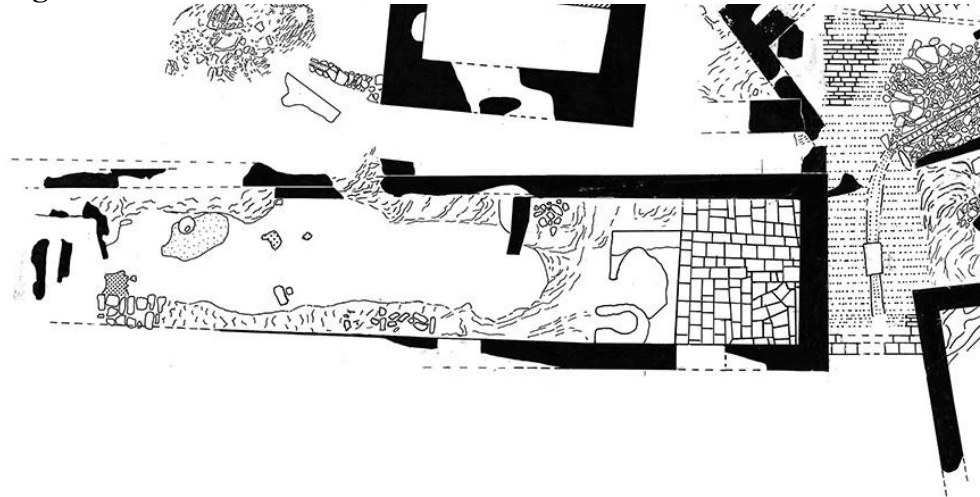
¹ Bibliotheca historica 23.18.5.

² Naturalis Historia III.91.

³ Isler 1993; Isler 2001; Isler 2007.

area, the taproom, and the zone behind the counter; to the west, room B with a separate entrance from the south. During the excavation numerous fragments of eating, drinking and cooking vessels as well as a masonry counter, a lot of animal bones and an oven were discovered. As a consequence, the building can be interpreted as a tavern where simple meals and wine were sold (Latin: *popina*).

Figure 2. *Tavern, Ground Plan*



Source: Database of the Ietas excavation project, Zurich.

Furnishings and Facilities

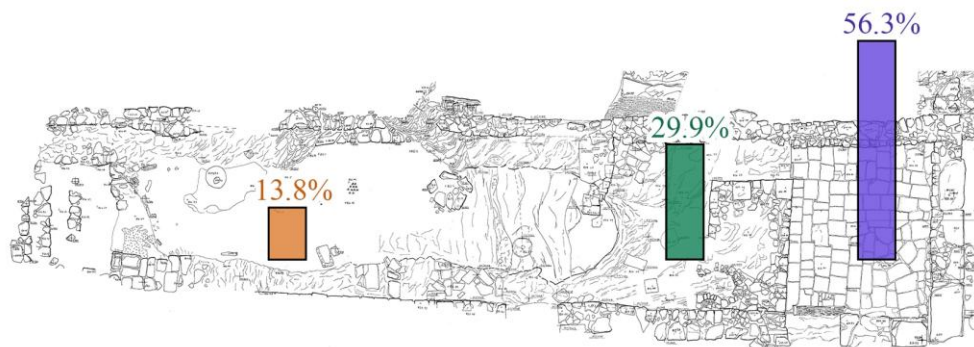
Furnishings

The finds come from a massive destruction layer that has been discovered inside room A and room B. The building collapsed probably as a consequence of an earthquake that happened around 50 AD and affected several parts of the Roman city. This closed context allows the reconstruction of the tavern's inventory and in part also of its facilities, as the entire building with all its content was destroyed in a short time and not used again afterwards.

The better part of the inventory is represented by the pottery (in total 72,7% of the finds), overall 1190 vessels (minimum number of individuals). The pottery can be divided into tableware (340 vessels or 20,8% of the finds) and common ware (850 or 52,0%). The next smaller percentage is represented by the iron objects (9,5% or 156 items), mainly nails, but also several tools, hinge elements and keys. Moreover, illumination of the tavern was provided by 114 oil lamps (7,0% of the finds). The next smaller groups are formed by bronze objects (58 or 3,5%; mainly fittings, tools and vessels) and coins (39 or 2,4%). Objects made of glass, mostly vessels, are much rarer (2,0%); organic material, stone items, loom weights, terracotta objects and sculpture fragments only occur in single cases.

The finds were not evenly distributed in the respective rooms. First of all the total minimum number of individuals that were found in the two different rooms vary. In the taproom, 493 vessels were discovered, whereas in the area behind the counter, 331 vases could be identified. These two parts of room A are of similar size, so the different numbers result probably from the fact that the counter occupied much space in this area and as a consequence there was perhaps not as much room for racks where vessels could be stored as in the taproom. In room B the excavators unearthed only 328 vases in the Roman layers, although room B is almost four times the size of the taproom. Therefore, the function of room B must have been different and had less to do with using or storing pottery – even though the find of 328 vessels is still worth mentioning.

Figure 3. *Distribution of the Tableware (Terra Sigillata And Thin-Walled Ware Combined). Purple: room A, Taproom; Green: Room A, Area behind Counter; Orange: Room B*



Source: Database of the Ietas excavation project, Zurich / Eva Riediker-Liechti.

Particularly conspicuous is the distribution of the tableware, that is the *terra sigillata* and the *thin-walled ware* (cf. Figure 3)¹. 185 or 76,5% of the *terra sigillata* vessels were found in room A. Of these vases, 118 were located in the taproom (48,8%) and 67 in the area behind the counter (27,7%). In room B, only 39 vessels (16,1%) were excavated, despite its larger size². The distribution of the second type of tableware, the *thin-walled ware*, is even more distinct: 96,3% of the vessels were situated in room A at the time of destruction (66,3% in the taproom and 30,0% in the zone behind the counter) whereas only 3 vessels (3,7%) were discovered in room B.

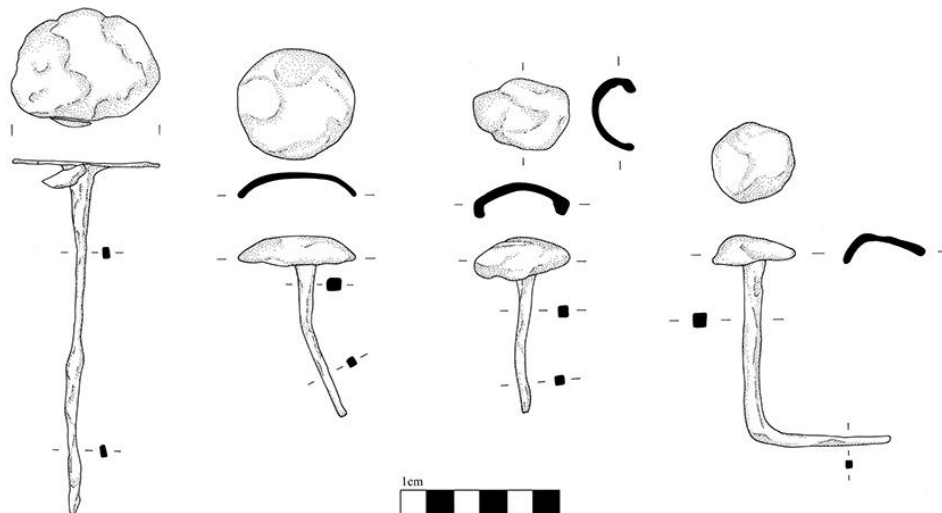
Tableware was used by the guests for eating and drinking. These numbers clearly show that room A was intended to cater for the guests, especially the eastern part with the paved floor (cf. chapter *Facilities – Room A*). The vessels behind the counter were possibly ready for the staff to be used to fill the drinking vessels with wine, load the plates and platters with food and fill the bowls with sauces or the like and hand them over to the customers.

¹ The black-gloss ware has been omitted in this context due to the rarity of this ceramic type in the tavern.

² The remaining 18 vessels could not be located securely.

In the majority of cases, the nails that were found in the tavern¹ (cf. Figure 4) exhibit broad nailheads (diameters between 1,0 and 5,5 cm, mostly between 2,0 and 3,0 cm). Nails can provide an indication of wooden constructions such as shelves or doors that have not been preserved; either as constructional elements or as a sort of decoration. In this context, it is important to consider the exact find spots where they can be retraced in the excavation reports. In the taproom, there are four interesting areas: In the northeastern corner as well as in the southeastern corner four nails were found, additionally, seven nails were discovered east of the counter. Next to the entrance from the south, or the respective threshold, nine nails were revealed. The first three find spots presumably indicate racks, whereas the last come from a door or shutter that blocked the tavern's entrance when it was closed at night. At Pompeii, many thresholds of taverns still show recesses for shutters or a hole for the door jamb². However, the tavern at Ietas exhibits no traces of such recesses.

Figure 4. *Four Examples of Nails from the Tavern (from left to right: Inv. no. V1249, V2340, V2458, V1805)*



Source: Database of the Ietas excavation project, Zurich; drawing: Carla Buoite.

Furthermore, eight nails were unearthed north of the counter, whereby three of them were found in the northwestern corner of the room. Similar to the five nails found behind the counter, they probably indicate the position of a shelf. In the area west of the counter, where the access to room B was, 18 nails could be located. Hence, it is likely to assume that there was another wooden door in this spot.

A further concentration of 9 nails was discovered close to the south wall of room B, more or less in the area of the former entrance that was later closed with masonry (cf. chapter *Facilities – Room B*). Presumably there was another

¹ 93 nails.

² Gassner 1986, 29-30.

shelf on the wall in this area. The find spots of the remaining nails from room B were not recorded in detail, so that no further conclusions are possible.

Facilities – Room A

Room A measures 4,18 metres in the east or 4,10 metres in the west, respectively, by 7,52 metres. Any guest entering room A through the entrance to the south would first notice the threshold of the door that consists in its northern part of tiles placed on edge, not unlike an *opus spicatum*, bordered north and west with orthostats.

The guest would then step into an area that was paved with slabs of limestone, sandstone and red and yellow terracotta. In the northern half, the room was paved regularly with orthogonal joints whilst the southern half shows mostly oblique joints. According to the excavation reports, there is a channel under the slabs that runs from northwest to southeast and presumably served as a drain.

Situated to the left of the entrance was an L-shaped masonry counter. It was approximately 0,75 metres high and 3,12 metres long, leaving a passage of 0,98 to 1,07 metres between the counter and the north wall of the room. The surface of the counter was covered with terracotta slabs (in addition to the plastering and painting of some parts, cf. below). Some of the slabs were found in the debris behind the counter¹, still covered with mortar. Incorporated into the masonry of the counter were in addition at least three *dolia* (large storage containers). The respective fragments were also discovered in the destruction layer. In contrast, at Pompeii almost half the tavern counters were lined with marble pieces set into mortar, at least in the last construction phase after the earthquake of 62 AD².

The walls of the taproom were plastered and painted. Rests of the undercoat were discovered *in situ* in the northeastern corner to a maximum height of 34 cm and to a length of 80 cm (north wall) and 43 cm (east wall), respectively. Fragments of painted stucco were unearthed in the destruction debris close to the east wall, the south wall and the counter that was therefore painted as well. Next to the wall north of the counter and the wall between room A and B more stucco fragments were found – so not only the taproom, but also the area behind the counter was at least partly plastered and painted. The preserved colours are largely red, but also yellow and black. As no figural motives are recognizable, a geometrical design seems to be most likely.

Adjoining to the south wall an oven is located immediately west of the counter arm that runs from north to south (cf. Figure 5). It is built of tiles and displays a horseshoe shape. A tapering terracotta tube (36,3 cm long) with burn marks probably belonged to the same construction and served as the oven's chimney.

¹ Cat. no. 1687, 1688, 1693, 2198; more (wall fragments) are listed in the excavation report but were not retained.

² Fant - Attanasio 2009, 1.

Figure 5. *Oven and Remains of the Counter, from the West*



Source: Database of the Ietas excavation project, Zurich.

Room A was separated from room B by a wall that runs from north to south and is not well preserved. Access was most probably possible in the southern section of this wall where a wooden door can be expected (cf. chapter *Furnishings*).

Facilities – Room B

Room B measures 4,00 metres by 12,72 metres. From the outside, room B could be entered through an access in the southeastern corner. In the west, the situation is much more unclear due to the badly preserved west wall. At least in the southwest of the building there seems to have been an entrance. Two former doors in the south wall were later closed with masonry as the connection joints prove. In one of these former doors, located 2,34 metres west of the door in the south wall, a window (53 cm wide) was left open.

Approximately in the middle of the room, traces of a probable mosaic floor were discovered. They consisted of white and coloured tesserae and red terracotta fragments. At least this part of the room seems to have shown a more elaborate floor.

Painted plaster fragments found in different areas of room B and *in situ* on the south wall prove that it was plastered and painted as well, at least partly. Due to the poor preservation of the north and west walls, plastering of these parts cannot be verified.

In the western area of this room, close to the northern wall, a rotary quern made of tuff was positioned. Three large fragments of it were unearthed in the destruction debris. Accordingly, this must have been the place where flour was produced for utilization in the tavern's kitchen.

Location of the Tavern and Its Significance for the Customers

Roman authors mostly describe taverns and bars in a pejorative context. Their clients are characterized as belonging to the lowest stratum of society and their behaviour depicted as immoral or even illegal. Juvenal, for instance, mentions cut-throats, sailors, thieves, runaway slaves and the like¹. They are furthermore contrasted with the honourable members of the nobility for whom it was improper to be seen in such a place (and indeed, some authors used this accusation to denigrate certain members of the elite)².

At Pompeii, where large parts of a Roman city have been unearthed, Ellis examined the distribution of taverns and bars³. Before this analysis, it has been assumed by many scholars that there were no taverns to be found near the *forum* or other civically important areas, because they were places of immorality and they were therefore banned from those zones to maintain a social dignity. However, Ellis discovered that five taverns were once located close to one of the main entrances of the *forum* and another eight were situated nearby, within one block of a primary entrance⁴. This distribution shows that the location of a bar is not determined by a “moral geography” but rather by a demand of the majority of the inhabitants of a town. The services of taverns - offering food and drink - were indispensable for a lot of the residents of a Roman city because many were members of the lower class and lived in rented flats where they had no dining rooms, kitchens or sometimes not even basic facilities for cooking.

For the town of Ietas only one tavern has been securely identified so far, which is the one described above. Its prominent location situated close to the edge of the *forum* is very conspicuous. Though the tavern is not accessible directly from the *forum* square, it is situated immediately to the west of a ramp that leads to the *forum* and represents the main access from the south. The tavern’s immediate vicinity to the *oikos* temple, located on the higher level of the *forum* directly to the north, emphasizes its significance within the city plan even further. The tavern’s prominent location thus reflects the importance of this establishment to the residents of Ietas in their everyday life.

Moreover, this tavern was not only a place to eat or drink, but also to be entertained at. Four glass gaming pieces attest that many guests liked to pass their time in this establishment playing board games. That no example of a board has been preserved should not surprise, as they were often made of wood or leather.

The tavern’s clients thus spent a considerable part of their leisure time there – sometimes far into the night as the 114 oil lamps imply.

¹ Satires 8.171-176.

² Monteix 2007, 117-128.

³ Ellis 2004.

⁴ Ellis 2004, 376-377.

Commercial Questions

Some categories of finds allow drawing conclusions about their place of production. Through such object classes it is possible to reconstruct to some extent the trading network in which the city of Ietas had a part.

The Italian *terra sigillata* from the tavern of Ietas for example provides us with 42 potter's stamps (cf. Figure 6). Of these examples, 26 could be assigned to a particular production centre. More than half of these vessels (53,8%) were made in Arezzo whereas 23,1% originate from Pisa (only from the workshops of Ateius). Three vessels (11,5%) exhibit stamps from workshops in Pozzuoli; two vessels (7,7%) can be traced back to central Italy; one example was produced in Arezzo or Lyon.

Figure 6. Terra Sigillata, Potter's Stamps (From Left to Right: Cn. Ateius Xanthus, Pisa; Cn. Ateius, Pisa; C. Gavius, Arezzo)



Source: Database of the Ietas excavation project, Zurich.

A special type of *terra sigillata* is the Campanian Orange Ware. The 16 vessels of this ware, which were found in the tavern, were imported from Campania¹.

Only one specimen of *Eastern Sigillata A* was found in the tavern. This platter was produced in the eastern Mediterranean, namely in the area of present-day northern Syria².

In regard to the *thin-walled ware*, the production areas of only a few examples from the tavern's inventory could be ascertained. Five vessels were imported from central Italy, two from central Italy or Lyon and one possibly from the Iberian Peninsula³.

Most of the 41 amphorae of which the place of production could be specified (15 examples or 36,6%) are of the type Dressel 21-22 which contained pickled tuna⁴. They were most likely produced in Sicily. These vessels were therefore part of the regional trade. Others were brought from more distant regions of the Empire: 10 wine amphorae (24,4%) were imported from central Italy, 31.7% were produced in Spain (*Hispania Tarraconensis* or *Baetica*; filled with fermented fish sauce in the case of type Dressel 7-11, or wine in amphorae of the type Dressel 2-4) and one container was made in

¹ Soricelli 1987, 73-85.

² Hayes 1997, 52-54.

³ Ricci 1985, 251. 266. 269. 287.

⁴ Botte 2009, 6-7. 171.

Calabria. Furthermore, a few single bottom sherds may possibly point to trading connections with the eastern Mediterranean and northern Africa (*Tripolitania*).

Seventeen cooking or baking platters belong to the Pompeian Red ware. Compared to common cooking ware they were covered with a slip on the inside that prevented the adhesion of food. Pompeian Red ware was produced in the volcanic area between Etruria and Campania as well as in Central Gaul¹.

Whereas 70,2% of the terracotta lamps from the tavern were produced in Sicily, the 21,1% mouldmade Roman Imperial lamps are most probably imports from mainland Italy. They were more elaborate than the Sicilian wheel-turned lamps and can therefore count as expensive prestige objects. This corresponds to the fact that the simpler Sicilian lamps were more numerous in the tavern of Ietas, compared to the mouldmade Roman Imperial lamps, as the owner and his employees presumably were not very rich. Contrastingly, in the Peristyle House 1, a luxuriant building of the upper class of Ietas, of the 38 oil lamps 25 (65,8%) were mouldmade and only 9 were Sicilian wheel-turned lamps². The residents of this house apparently preferred the more expensive imports.

Hence, it becomes apparent that Ietas was integrated both in the regional and in the supra-regional trade of the western Mediterranean area.

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¹ Podavitte 2014, 125.

² Hedinger 1999, 478-581.

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